Daniel Coats

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Christianity in China: A Literature Review and Directions for Further Research

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When Maoism took control of Mainland China in 1949 following a protracted civil war, an officially atheistic worldview was promulgated throughout the world's most populous nation. The Protestant and Catholic missionary efforts that had impacted communities throughout China, especially the urbanized east, since the 19th century came to an end. Within 20 years, some of the most extreme manifestations of communist revolution swept through the country, resulting in the virtual elimination of Christianity and all other religious expression. But during the last two decades of the 20th century, it became clear that the eradication of faith from China was not only unsuccessful, but it had given rise to a most unforeseen consequence: one of the largest indigenous growths of Christianity in modern history.

Unlike in many of the nations of the former Soviet Union, where a loosening of Cold War-era religious restrictions led to a restoration of sorts to pre-USSR faith practice, China by the late 20th century had not merely returned to the vitality of Christianity prior to the introduction of Maoism. Rather, the church – both official and underground – had experienced a massive unprecedented increase that has continued into the 21st century.

By some measures, Mainland China has as many, if not more, practicing and devout Christians (in a numerical total) than the United States has. Some regions, most notably Henan Province, the historic birthplace of Sino civilization, now have large Christian percentages (in excess of 10% by even conservative statistics), though other parts of the country have much smaller representations.

An understanding of the growth of Christianity in Mainland China in recent generations is essential knowledge for a number of reasons: It gives insights into the broader trends – not always accessible by statistics but incredibly impactful nonetheless – that are shaping East Asia,

arguably the world's second foremost economic powerhouse after the U.S., and informs discussion – across all disciplines – on the role of Christianity as a significant minority religion in the life of one of the world's most significant historic and modern societies.

Historical Background

Common discussion on Asian Christianity looks to European and North American missionary endeavors since 1500 as being the genesis and impetus of Christian belief in this region. While certainly vitally important in the spread of the faith in this historically largely polytheistic area, modern missions postdate China's first contact with Christianity by many centuries.

Figure 1: The Nestorian Stele, detailing early Chinese Christianity. Photo from Wikimedia Commons

The so-called Nestorian Stele, a tablet erected in 781 A.D., examines 150 years of Christianity in China during the first millennium of the present era. Among the most significant features of this history was the recognition of Christianity during the Tang Dynasty (Jenkins, 2008).

By the end of the First Millennium, however, Christianity in China was banned, part of the first wave of persecution against the faith in the Far East. As has been the case on multiple occasions in Chinese history, opposition to Christianity included xenophobic elements, attempting to equate the faith with supposedly

threatening foreign influences. In this case, Buddhism and Zoroastrianism were also opposed in a purge promulgated by Tang Emperor Wuzong (Phillip, 1998).

It would not be until the 16th century that European influences would bring contact with Jesuit missionary activity, followed by the introduction of Russian Orthodoxy in 1715 and Protestantism in 1807. Thus, during the early modern period, China would be impacted by all three of the major branches of Christianity: Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy and Protestantism.

The most intense period of missionary activity in China peaked in the late 19th century and early 20th century, coinciding with the pinnacle of European colonial expansion and governance. While still very much the minority, millions of Chinese were impacted by the Christian message and indigenous missionary activity soon sprang up.

Under communism, Christianity has been divided between government-supported branches (specifically the Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement and the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Church), which permit some religious expression while maintaining official controls and messaging in keeping with that of the Chinese government, and officially persecuted independent branches, such as the extensive Protestant house church movement or Catholics who maintain an allegiance to the papacy.

Contradictions and Confusions

To an international audience, the state of Christianity in China may be bewildering and often blatantly contradictory. Eleanor Albert of the Council on Foreign Relations notes that China is the world's top producer of Bibles (Albert, 2018), though persecution continues, with the

nation remaining in the worst category on religious freedom scores (Pew Research Center, 2018), with some of the most virulent opposition directed against Christians.

Even a rudimentary and loose statistic on the number of Chinese Christians Is highly controversial, debated in Chinese government, Christian and academic sources. Fenggang Yang, director of the Center on Religion and Chinese Society at Purdue University, estimates Protestantism alone to have between 93 million and 115 million adherents in the nation (Zhou, 2017), a high figure approaching a tenth of the nationwide populace but far below some extreme high estimates. Fewer than 30 million are affiliated with the official churches, the only for which official data from the Chinese government is available.

With a growth rate of about 7% per year since 1950, Yang suggests that a continuation of this trend could make China two-thirds Christian by the year 2050.

The Pew Research Forum estimated in 2010 that China had 68 million Christians, or around 5% of the national population (Pew Research Center, 2015). The forum notes that the future of religious switching in China could have a major impact on Christianity globally, including whether the faith remains the world's largest religion in terms of number of adherents, compared with the global runner-up of Islam.

"While all religious groups in China could be experiencing significant change through switching, media reports and expert assessments generally suggest that the main effects are rising numbers of Christians and declining numbers of religiously unaffiliated people," they report. "If everyone who is currently unaffiliated in China were to convert to Christianity by 2050, China's population would be 56.2% Christian (734 million Christians), raising the Christian share of the world's population to 38.5% and lowering the unaffiliated share of the global

population to 6.1%. Though that scenario may be unlikely, it offers a rough sense of how much difference religious switching in China maximally could have by 2050. Extremely rapid growth of Christianity in China could maintain or, conceivably, even increase Christianity's current numerical advantage as the world's largest religion, and it could significantly accelerate the projected decline by 2050 in the share of the global population that is religiously unaffiliated."

On the other hand, official Chinese government statistics propose a much lower percentage and numerical total of adherents to all religions, including Christianity. According to a report issued by the U.S. Department of Justice, "The Chinese government officially recognizes that major religions practiced in China include Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism, and Protestantism, with a total of nearly two hundred million believers and more than 380,000 clerical personnel" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). Of these, the government claims Buddhism and Taoism as having the most adherents, while "Catholicism has about six million believers and about eight thousand clerical personnel in China. Protestantism has over thirty-eight million followers and over 57,000 clerical personnel."

Almost all external sources, Christian and secular, would take issue with these numbers as being too low, noting the many unregistered assemblies in the nation. Still, it serves as a cautionary reminder that clear statistics are elusive.

The Nature of Chinese Christianity

Perhaps equaled only by the complications in assessing numerical totals to Chinese Christianity are the incongruencies in assessing the nature of the faith in China, particularly when examining Protestantism (which would appear by all accounts to have the majority of believers and be the recipient of the largest growth).

In 1979, when Deng Xiaoping came to power after the decades of virulent Maoism, the Chinese government allowed for limited religious expression once again, on par with what was originally permitted during early communist times in the 1950s. For Protestantism, the main officially recognized body is the Three-Self Churches (TSPM), while Catholicism has the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which has a stormy relationship with the Vatican.

When international sources attempt to assess these state-based churches, there is a tendency toward two opposite extreme positions: either that these churches do not contain true Christian believers, but rather are entirely arms of the secular government embracing a faux veneer of faith, or on the other hand, that these are the mainline Christian expressions in the country, with the large number of house churches to be viewed with doctrinal suspicion, likely lying outside of the traditional historical beliefs of Christianity.

Tony Lambert, a Briton who devoted 40 years of research to Chinese Christianity, first serving with the British Embassy in Beijing and eventually working as director of China research for OMF International, offers this balanced assessment of the Three-Self movement:

> Its constitution clearly states that its main reason for existence is to pass down the Party's policies and ensure that they are implemented by believers on the local level. No one who has sat down with pastors in both the registered and unregistered churches over the last twenty years can ignore the evidence that there is still a high degree of political control operating behind the scenes. Certain pastors are avoided by believers as known collaborators, and as those who betrayed their brethren in the dark days of the 1950s and 1960s. The rift between the TSPM and the unregistered house churches is a fact of life based on years of bitter experience of betrayal and persecution.
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> And yet…there is a qualitative difference between the situation in most of the registered TSPM churches now, compared with what it was in the 1950s and early 1960s. Then sermons were drearily political and the churches empty of all save a faithful remnant of the elderly and a *coterie* of politically-motivated church leaders whose liberal theology shaded into total and abject collaboration with the Party. Today churches are packed with eager believers clasping their Bibles and hymnbooks and drinking in hour-long sermons. Mostly the preaching is evangelical with the very barest lip-service paid to

> politics. The churches attract sacrificial service by a whole array of unpaid *yigong* (volunteer workers) both young and old, who preach, visit the sick, counsel, pray and evangelise (Lambert, 2006).

A quality internal source on the TSPM is the *Nanjing Theological Review*, originally produced in 1953 and published quarterly from 1994 from Nanjing Union Theological Seminary, the only national-level Protestant seminary in China and often viewed as emblematic of the movement. Full text is available online in Mandarin Chinese (China Knowledge Resource Integrated Database, 2019).

On the other hand, Lambert cautions against the denigration of the house church movement:

> Because of lack of information and misunderstanding by Western Christians, as well as deliberate disinformation put out by the TSPM and Chinese authorities, even some Western evangelicals came to regard the house churches as dubious and extremist sects who deliberately provoke the authorities into bringing down persecution onto their own heads. However, the heart of the house church movement takes a conscious stand on the authority of Scripture and has worked out a biblical view of church-State relations. Put simply, Christ is the Head of the Church, and while every Chinese house-church Christian sees it as his duty to be a good citizen, he is not prepared to accept State control of Christ's Church through its organ, the TSPM. The house churches seek to worship and evangelise according to the precepts of Scripture, not the various restrictions laid down by the government's Religious Affairs Bureau. If clashes and contradictions arise, they are prepared to say, like the apostle Peter before the Sanhedrin, "We must obey God rather than men." (Acts 5:29) (Lambert, 2006).

What are these restrictions that many house church believers chafe at? In 1998, leaders of four major house church movements approved a statement of faith that closely aligns with evangelical beliefs in the U.S. and other countries, along with the rationale for failing to join the official movement, including opposition to state ordinances that religious activities can only be performed in designated locations by approved clerics; state policies forbidding children and youths from being evangelized; prohibitions of prayer and supernatural acts related to physical

and mental healing; and the government's refusal to allow the church to interact with believers from other countries (China News and Church Report, 1998).

House churches tend to be concentrated more generally in rural areas, among individuals with lower socioeconomic status. On the other hand, Christian expression is also rising in urban areas, among all classes and strata of society from laborers to academics and government officials.

Interest in Christianity among university students, both within China and among those studying abroad, is of particular interest, for it serves to challenge long-held notions on the appeal of Christian faith, both in China and further afield. In fact, some surveys hold that the Christian percentage is very slightly higher among the more educated in China that among those lacking even a secondary education, while Buddhist expressions are much less common among the higher educated compared to those with less schooling (Stark and Wang, 2015).

They report "no one has adequately explained why Christianity seems to have such great appeal to the most educated Chinese. Indeed, if true, the special appeal of Christianity to the educated Chinese is quite inconsistent with the still-prevailing notion among sociologists that religion functions primarily to compensate the lower classes for their worldly deprivations" (Stark and Wang, 2015). A supposed greater appeal of monotheism to a highly-educated modern mind compared with traditional polytheism, though coupled with some parallels with Chinese folk religion and having a highly flexible and adaptive form, has been put forward by some as a possible cause for this (Hunter and Chan, 1993), though this explanation is still quite unsatisfactory for a complete understanding, when looking at similar conditions in other parts of the world.

A continued highly educated Christian expression, combined with China's rise to global economic prominence, could well be an important force in world thought in decades to come.

Geographic Distribution

Unlike the U.S., China is a unitary state, meaning that power is concentrated at the national level and local units of government merely exist to carry out these nationwide directives. However, the nation does have several special administrative regions (such as Tibet or Hong Kong) that have various levels of self-government differing from the overall norm. There are 31 provinces or other similar units of local governance in China, minus the former European colonies of Macau and Hong Kong.

But despite the relative cohesion in the Chinese administrative system, as a nation comparatively equal in size to the U.S. or all of Western Europe, China does have a great diversity in socioeconomic and religious conditions. The most striking difference is between the densely populated and heavily industrialized east and the much less populated, relatively underdeveloped and often minority-based west.

While precise figures vary greatly, the general geographic distribution of Christians in China is agreed upon by a wide range of sources. One of the most thorough reviews was published in 2010 by Paul and Joy Hattaway of Asia Harvest, an interdenominational Christian ministry. Looking at the entire Christian population (including official and unregistered churches and Catholic and Protestant expressions) in each province, their study argues that Zhejiang Province is the most heavily Christianized, at 18.54% (Hattaway, 2010). This was one of the first provinces to be reached by Protestant missionary activity (Lambert, 2006) and includes the

Greater Wenzhou area, which has been dubbed the “Jerusalem of China” for its largest Christian population.

In descending order of percentage, other provinces with largest Christian populations include Henan (14.75%), Fujian (14.31%), Anhui (14.27%), Hong Kong (13.69%) and Shanghai (11.22%). These are the only provinces in which the total Christian percentage exceeds 10%. With the exception of Anhui, which was historically an underdeveloped province, all of these provinces with significant Christian percentages were recipients of extensive Protestant and Catholic missionary activity prior to 1949. From a numerical standpoint, Henan Province, which has a population of about 100 million, would appear to have the largest absolute number of Christians of any province. This area has been dubbed by officials as the “Jesus Nest” due to the persistent growth of the faith.

On the other extreme, the smallest Christian percentage in China is found in Tibet (0.32%), the seat of Lamaism, a Buddhist religion. Guangxi (home to a large Thai population, potentially China’s largest minority group) takes second spot for the smallest Christian percentage, at 2.03%, followed, in ascending order of percentage, by Sichuan (3.11%), Hunan (3.39%) and Ningxia (3.84%). Sichuan and Hunan appear to exercise a great deal of governmental control over Christian populations, which in the latter case might appear most understandable when considering that the province was Mao Zedong’s home province. Ningxia, in the far west, has a significant Muslim population.

Looking specifically at Catholicism, Hebei Province is the most Catholic of China’s administrative regions, with Baoding serving as a central city in the nation’s underground

Catholicism that remains loyal to the Vatican rather than the Chinese government (Lambert, 2006).

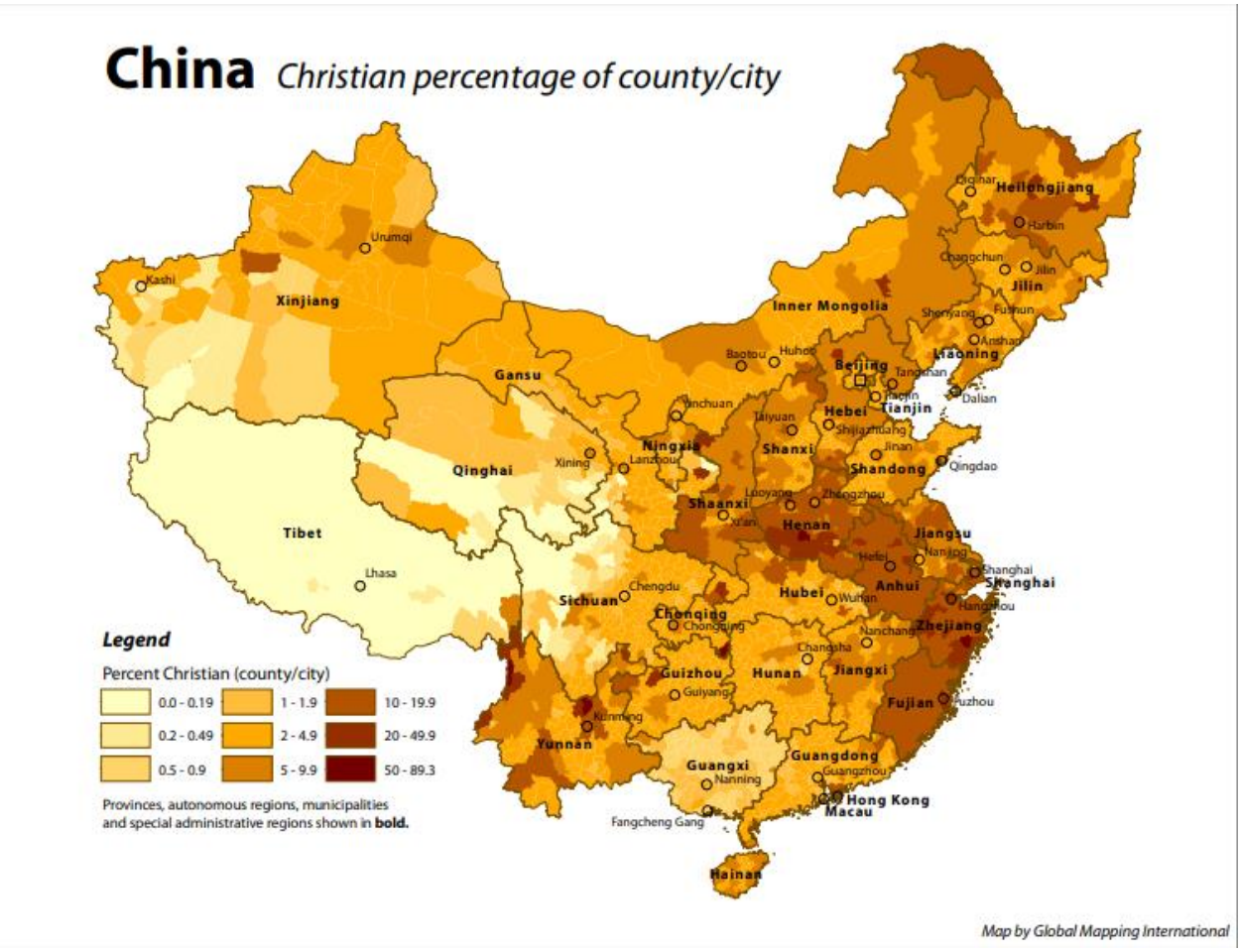

Figure 2: Hattaway's Christian percentages by Chinese province, county and city.

Possible Areas for Research

There are hindrances to the study of Christianity in China, most notably due to the tenuous political positions of non-registered believers in the nation, coupled with the restrictions that limit communication with even the officially recognized streams of the faith.

However, sufficient primary and secondary sources exist in the global body of literature to permit further conclusions to be drawn without personal contact. Additionally, the growing Chinese diaspora globally would facilitate contacts with Chinese Christians who might have the

unique ability to provide insights, though confidentiality might need to be maintained, particularly if the individuals seek to return to their homeland or speak of their counterparts in their home country.

Following are possible areas of research which I believe would add to the overall body of knowledge in various disciplines:

- **Examination of Christian local and provincial percentages, compared with economic vitality.** The world is fascinated by the economic powerhouse that is modern-day China, yet this dynamism is not evenly distributed across the country. An examination of the Christian percentages in each region, coupled with economic statistics such as GDP, GDP per capita, labor sector employment and standard of living could be enlightening both in understanding the Chinese Christian experience and the nation's economic miracle.
- **Research into the ages at conversion of Chinese Christians.** In the United States, church leaders are informed that the vast majority of religious conversions occur in childhood or youth, with a rapid decline in conversions after the 20s. For instance, according to a National Association of Evangelicals (NAE) poll, the median age at which members made a profession of faith was age 11, while 63% made a commitment between the ages of four and 14 (National Association of Evangelicals, 2015). But in China, where government policy forbids the evangelization of children and youths, does this principle still hold true? A poll of Chinese Christian believers could provide revealing insights into whether these age-based statistics are truly endemic of Christianity as a whole or merely specific to the faith as it exists in the American cultural experience.

- **Assessment of the Biblical knowledge of Chinese Christians.** In the United States, a great deal of research exists into the extent that professing Christians understand essential doctrines and Biblical historical facts, such as naming the Ten Commandments or the 12 apostles, identifying pivotal moments in church history, or reciting key Biblical passages such as John 3:16. Similar insights into the Chinese Christian experience could help to clarify where this movement ranks in the doctrinal continuum.
- **Review of technological usage among Chinese Christians.** Digital technologies such as the internet have transformed life in all nations, and China is no exception (though there is a degree of government censorship there not experienced in many other places). As Chinese Christians utilize the internet and participate in web 2.0 technologies, does this strengthen or weaken their faith? Does it play any role in the Christian faith experience or change its expression? This research, which could include both quantitative and qualitative methods, would be helpful in ensuring that studies of Chinese Christianity remain relevant in today's ever-changing world, rather than relying on outdated anecdotes and statistics from decades ago.
- **Examination of popular culture participation of Chinese Christians.** As Chinese society develops a modern mass culture, how do Chinese Christians relate to this? In the U.S., while a few Christian groups shun modern entertainment and cultural expression in many of its forms, many are full participants, while others cleave to an evangelical subculture that provides alternatives to the secular expressions (such as Christian movies, music, fiction books, youth clubs, travel destinations, etc.). Particularly in light of the persecution that Chinese Christians may endure, it would be insightful as to

whether this would promote or hinder the development of a popular subculture specific to this group.

- **Study of family formation of Chinese Christian young adults.** In a society in which Christianity is still officially persecuted and some believers may come from antagonistic family backgrounds, it would be enlightening to discover how Christian young people in China find like-minded life partners and develop faith-centered marriages and families. Since intergenerational exchange is essential in the continuation of any religious belief system, such research could not only provide a possible preview of the future of Chinese Christianity, but perhaps also give insights for the future of religion in other settings and geographies. Personal surveys might be the best approach on this theme, though some opportunities for broad-scale impersonal quantitative research can also be envisioned.

NOTE: *In this report, as I extensively quote the works of other authors, I remain true to their grammar and style, even if this contravenes norms or consistency. This includes spellings that are not typical in U.S. English, but are used in the authors' home dialects.*

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